



PEACE CORPS

*50 Years of
Promoting Friendship
and Peace*



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Cover: A peace Corps volunteer helps a student in southern Africa.

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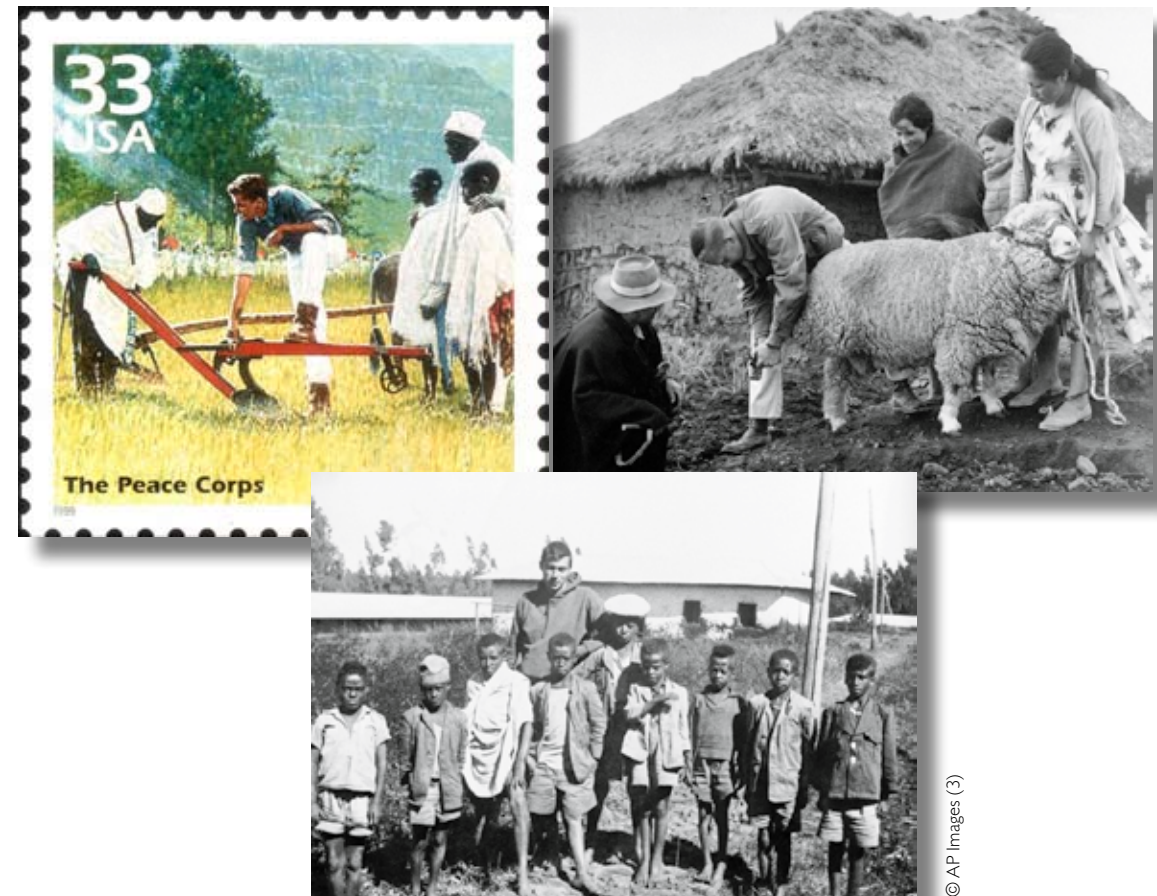
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About This Issue



During the 1960 presidential campaign, candidate John F. Kennedy asked a group of U.S. college students, “How many of you who are going to be doctors are willing to spend your days in Ghana? Technicians or engineers, how many of you are willing to work in the Foreign Service and spend your lives traveling around the world?” Within months of taking office in 1961, Kennedy signed an executive order establishing the Peace Corps.

Since then, more than 200,000 Americans have responded to Kennedy’s challenge by serving as Peace Corps volunteers, helping people in 139 countries to raise fish and farm animals, learn English, and build basic water systems. In the process of helping others, these Americans have learned about the world and brought their enhanced understanding of other countries and cultures back to the United States.

In this issue of *eJournal USA*, we mark the 50th anniversary of the Peace Corps with narratives written by past volunteers and we glimpse the future of the Peace Corps in an essay by current Peace Corps Director Aaron S. Williams.

The Editors



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE / VOLUME 15 / NUMBER 11

Peace Corps: 50 Years of Promoting Friendship and Peace

3 50 Years of the Peace Corps

JOSHUA BERMAN, TRAVEL WRITER AND RETURNED PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEER

For 50 years Peace Corps volunteers have shared skills, built friendships and cultivated greater understanding between Americans and other world citizens.

6 Peace Corps: The Next 50 Years

AARON S. WILLIAMS, DIRECTOR OF THE PEACE CORPS

The Peace Corps will continue to meet the world's challenges with innovation, creativity, determination and compassion.

8 Volunteers at Work

Kathleen Fraser, Panama
Peter and Alene Kennedy Hendricks,
Republic of Georgia
Tia Tucker, Morocco
Don Hesse, Jordan
Jared Tharp, Senegal
Juan Rodriguez, Guyana
Rachelle Olden, Dominican Republic
Scott Lea, Indonesia
Kelly Petrowski, Malawi
Albin Sikora, Bulgaria
Patty and Harvey Gagnon,
Kyrgyz Republic
Löki Tobin, Azerbaijan

50 Years of the Peace Corps

Joshua Berman



The first group of Peace Corps volunteers prepares to depart for Ghana in 1961.

For 50 years Peace Corps volunteers have shared skills, built friendships and cultivated greater understanding between Americans and other world citizens. Joshua Berman is a travel writer and returned Peace Corps volunteer.

A barefoot boy sat in front of me, steering our horse down the narrow path. I laughed, sang and played at the boy's school all morning; his father had insisted that I return to my assigned village in style. I accepted.

With a whistle and a kick, the boy brought us to a

trot as we approached the river's edge. When we appeared out of the forest and into maize fields, farmers looked up and waved. On one hand, it was just another day in the Nicaraguan countryside; on the other hand, it was an important moment, the day a stranger had arrived in a remote Nicaraguan schoolhouse, and 40 children had met a foreigner for the first time in their lives.

The two years I spent in the Peace Corps were as unpredictable and rewarding as the ride down that mountain. I served as an environmental education volunteer in La Trinidad, Nicaragua, from 1998 to 2000. I had signed up for the same reason the first volunteers had



Volunteer Colin Dayly, 23, spends time with his host family in a Cambodian village in 2007.

© AP Images/Heng Smith

willing to spend their days in Ghana, their lives traveling the world. The idea was not entirely new, but a major government initiative to create and manage such a force of volunteers was new, and in March 1961, only months after being sworn in as president, Kennedy signed Executive Order 10924, providing for the establishment and administration of the Peace Corps.

“Life in the Peace Corps will not be easy,” he warned. “Men and women will be expected to work and live alongside the nationals of the country in which they are stationed — doing the same work, eating the same food, talking the same language.”

Despite these challenges, volunteers signed up by the thousands. As more

and more governments invited the Peace Corps to work in their countries, the program quickly expanded from two countries — Ghana and Tanzania — to dozens of developing countries worldwide. They lived deep in their assigned cities and villages. They worked with farmers, teachers, and health workers; they taught English; they helped raise fish and farm animals.

Throughout the 1960s, Peace Corps volunteers were assigned to newly independent but impoverished countries emerging from colonialism. The organization’s lofty goals of peace and development were genuine, and so was the Cold War–inspired mission to promote democracy and improve America’s image and influence.

In the 1970s, assignments became more targeted, and volunteers with more work experience were selected to serve. The average age of volunteers rose during this time — from 22 to 28 — and the percentage of volunteers over the age of 50 also climbed. By 1974, the Peace Corps had been invited to work in 69 countries, an all-time high.

In 1979, the Peace Corps was finally granted full autonomy within the executive branch of the U.S. government (it had previously been an agency within the State Department). During President Ronald Reagan’s administration in the 1980s, the size of the program and number of volunteers dropped, but new initiatives, especially to promote food security, were launched in the Caribbean, Central America and Africa.

The organization continued to evolve with the times. In 1991, after the collapse of the Soviet Union,

volunteers were assigned to Eastern Europe for the first time, to Lithuania, Estonia and other newly independent nations, where they were asked to help with small business development. These were transitional programs designed to assist countries as they moved from socialist- to market-based economies; within 10 years, the Baltic States programs closed, their job completed.

In 1993, the first volunteers arrived in China, primarily to teach English. Fifteen years later, there were 114 “U.S.-China Friendship Volunteers,” as Peace Corps volunteers (PCVs) are known there, teaching English in dozens of universities, medical schools and vocational colleges throughout the country.

Whatever the prevailing global political climate, once on the ground Peace Corps volunteers simply struggle to connect, fit in, and find meaningful work. Stanley Meissler, author of *When The World Calls: The Inside Story of the Peace Corps and Its First Fifty Years*, says, “Much of what volunteers do is just not quantifiable. Peace Corps annual reports can recite the numbers of fish ponds built or the kilos of honey created, but I have never been satisfied with those recitations.

“I feel the impact is so much greater,” Meissler says. “How do you measure the impact of the Peace Corps when two volunteers befriend a poor adolescent boy and he grows up to become president of Peru? Or how do you measure the impact of a [health volunteer] who shows Afghan nurses that demonstrating love and concern to a patient is part of the job? I simply have never doubted the enormous impact of PCVs on their hosts.”

That impact travels both ways and crosses oceans. Returned Peace Corps volunteers come home to the United States with knowledge of the cultures they’ve visited — and with new world views. They go into education, health care, development work, politics, business and the arts. Most continue working to “strengthen Americans’ understanding about the world and its peoples,” one of Kennedy’s original goals for the Peace Corps.

Of course “the world and its peoples” continued to change. After September 11, 2001, for example, as U.S. embassies around the world fortified their buildings, security concerns caused the Peace Corps to close some programs in some Central Asian countries and reassign them to areas such as the Caribbean and Latin America, which were perceived as safer.

Today, some 9,000 volunteers are serving in 77 countries. They work on projects in education, health, HIV/AIDS, business, the environment, agriculture and youth development. The U.S. Congress has just approved a historic high \$400 million Peace Corps budget.

The Peace Corps’ mission remains unique. Despite great changes in the United States and in the world over the decades, the Peace Corps continues to attract bipartisan U.S. political support. More than 200,000 Americans have served in the U.S. Peace Corps in 139 countries. n

The opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. government.

**“I had signed up...
to see the world,
to meet its people
and to participate in
one of the boldest
experiments ever
conducted in American
public service.”**

Peace Corps: The Next 50 Years

Aaron S. Williams



Peace Corps Director Aaron Williams meets with school children in Thailand.

The Peace Corps will continue to meet the world’s challenges with innovation, creativity, determination and compassion. Aaron S. Williams is director of the Peace Corps. He served as a Peace Corps volunteer in the small town of Monte Plata, Dominican Republic, from 1967 to 1970.

Fifty years ago presidential candidate John F. Kennedy arrived at the University of Michigan’s campus to deliver a campaign speech. It was late — nearly 2 a.m. — and the students were tired. But in Ann Arbor that cold October night Kennedy issued a daring challenge to the students:

“How many of you who are going to be doctors ... are willing to spend your days in Ghana? How many of

you are willing to work in the Foreign Service and spend your lives traveling around the world?” Kennedy asked the students.

Kennedy’s off-the-cuff speech lasted only a few minutes, but in that short time he described a vision for young Americans to serve their country by serving abroad. That vision lives on in the more than 200,000 Americans who have served as Peace Corps volunteers in 139 countries since 1961. And, while the world has changed significantly since the Peace Corps’ founding 50 years ago, the mission of promoting world peace and friendships remains the same.

Today’s volunteers meet the world’s challenges with innovation, creativity, determination and compassion. And they have tools unimagined when I was a Peace

Corps volunteer in the late 1960s. I used to stay in touch with my mother by writing letters — yes, letters! — with real stamps and envelopes. I’d walk to the local post office and hope that my notes arrived to my family safely.

Today, Peace Corps volunteers have technology at their fingertips. They e-mail, Skype, blog, text and tweet, and volunteers who serve in some of the remotest parts of the world can communicate with family and friends in the United States. They are able to teach other Americans about the countries and cultures in which they serve long before they return to the United States.

Volunteers also use technology to bolster creativity in new ways. Last summer, Peace Corps volunteers in Namibia created a health education program geared toward teens and young adults. Volunteers used text messages to receive and respond to questions on health-related topics like birth control and HIV/AIDS prevention. In the first month alone, volunteers sent more than 1,000 text messages in response to inquiries from the young community members.

For so many who serve, their time in the Peace Corps influences everything else they go on to do. As one returned volunteer from Sierra Leone put it, “I can never repay the people of Sierra Leone, but I can take those lessons, that personal growth, that broadened perspective, and apply it to my work back here Any accomplishments that I might contribute, any difference that I might make in even the smallest sense ... will in some way be shaped by my experience as a Peace Corps volunteer.”

For me, like so many others, the Peace Corps was the beginning of everything. It was the door to the rest of my life.

“Any accomplishments that I might contribute, any difference that I might make in even the smallest sense ... will in some way be shaped by my experience as a Peace Corps volunteer.”

When I applied to serve with the Peace Corps, it was the biggest risk I’d ever taken in my life. I worked in a small town in the Dominican Republic as a teacher’s trainer, helping 50 rural primary-school teachers earn their high school degrees. For two years, I visited the teachers in their communities on horseback, motorcycle, or by foot to help them apply new teaching methods. The teachers voluntarily attended all-day Saturday classes during the school year and gave up their summer vacations for even more training. They wanted to become better teachers, to access better opportunities, and I was determined to do everything in my power to help them succeed.

And what I took back when I returned to the United States was a belief in the power of unity and teamwork: That when we work together for a common goal, we can achieve magnificent things.

Volunteers return to the United States as global citizens, with leadership skills, language skills, technical skills, problem-solving skills, and cross-cultural insights that position them well for careers across fields and industries.

Although we’ve come a long way since President Kennedy’s 1960 speech, our journey is not complete. As long as there is suffering and strife in the world, we know that our work is not done.

I envision a Peace Corps that grows and adapts to the challenges of our time. I envision a Peace Corps that carries the torch of President Kennedy’s dream and is still going strong 50 years from now.

This towering task that is the Peace Corps still calls us to action. Let’s see what we can build together in the years to come. n

Volunteers at Work

Pease Corps volunteers work at the request of other countries to help develop better opportunities for their people, living and working with people in remote villages and burgeoning cities in the developing world. Since 1961, more than 200,000 Americans have served as volunteers in 139 countries. Here are glimpses of a few volunteers.



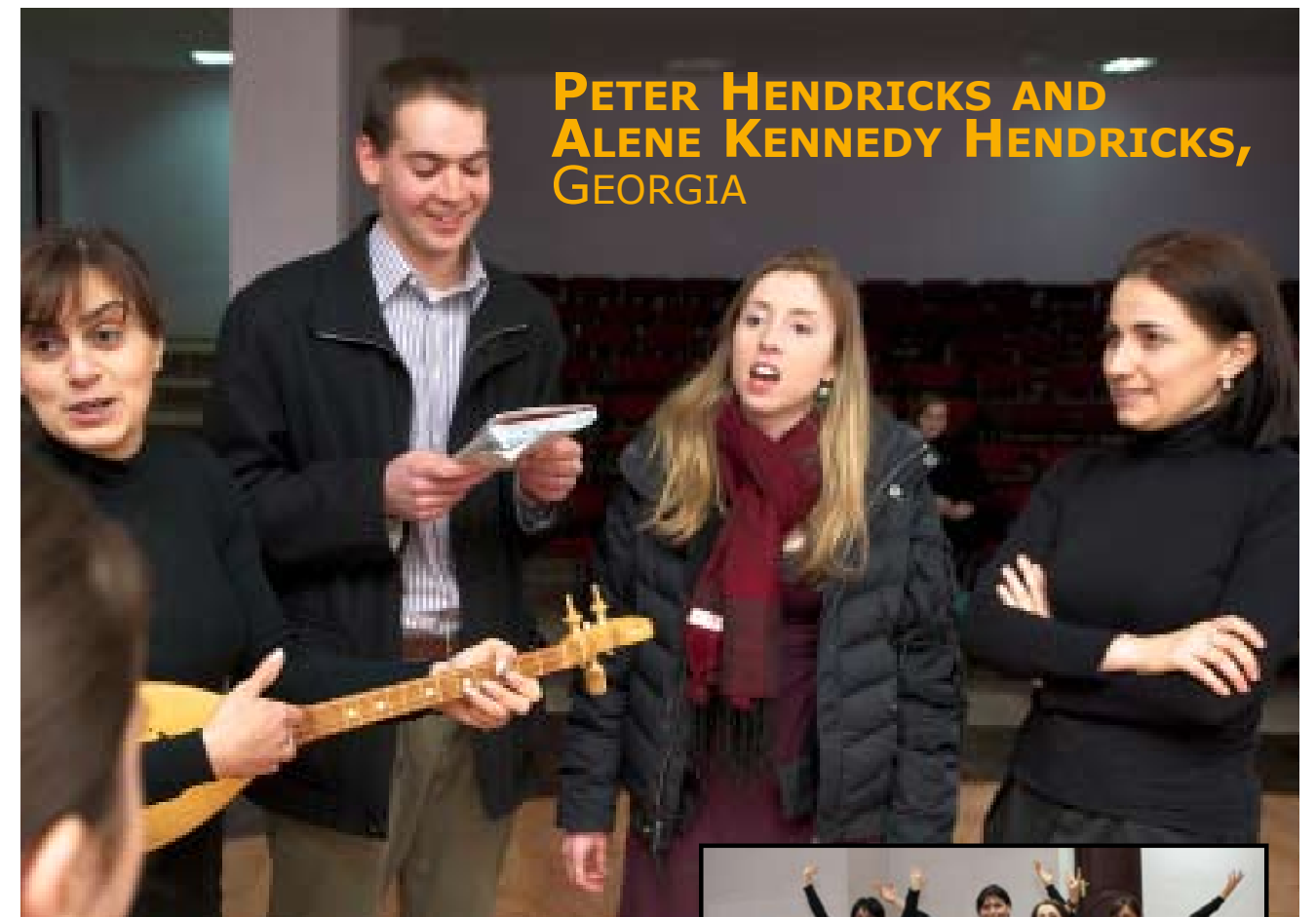


**KATHLEEN FRASER,
PANAMA**

Her business skills helped lift the income of coffee growers.



After working for two years in the U.S. financial sector, Kathleen Fraser of North Carolina was able to apply her business skills as a Peace Corps volunteer in rural Arglacias, Panama. During her time there, she worked with a small group of women to build and maintain beehives and sell honey to the tourist market. Fraser also helped coffee producers earn more money from their crop by toasting and grinding the beans instead of just selling the raw coffee cherries. “There are a lot of intermediaries involved in the coffee chain,” she said, “so the higher up that they can be on that chain, the more money they can earn.”

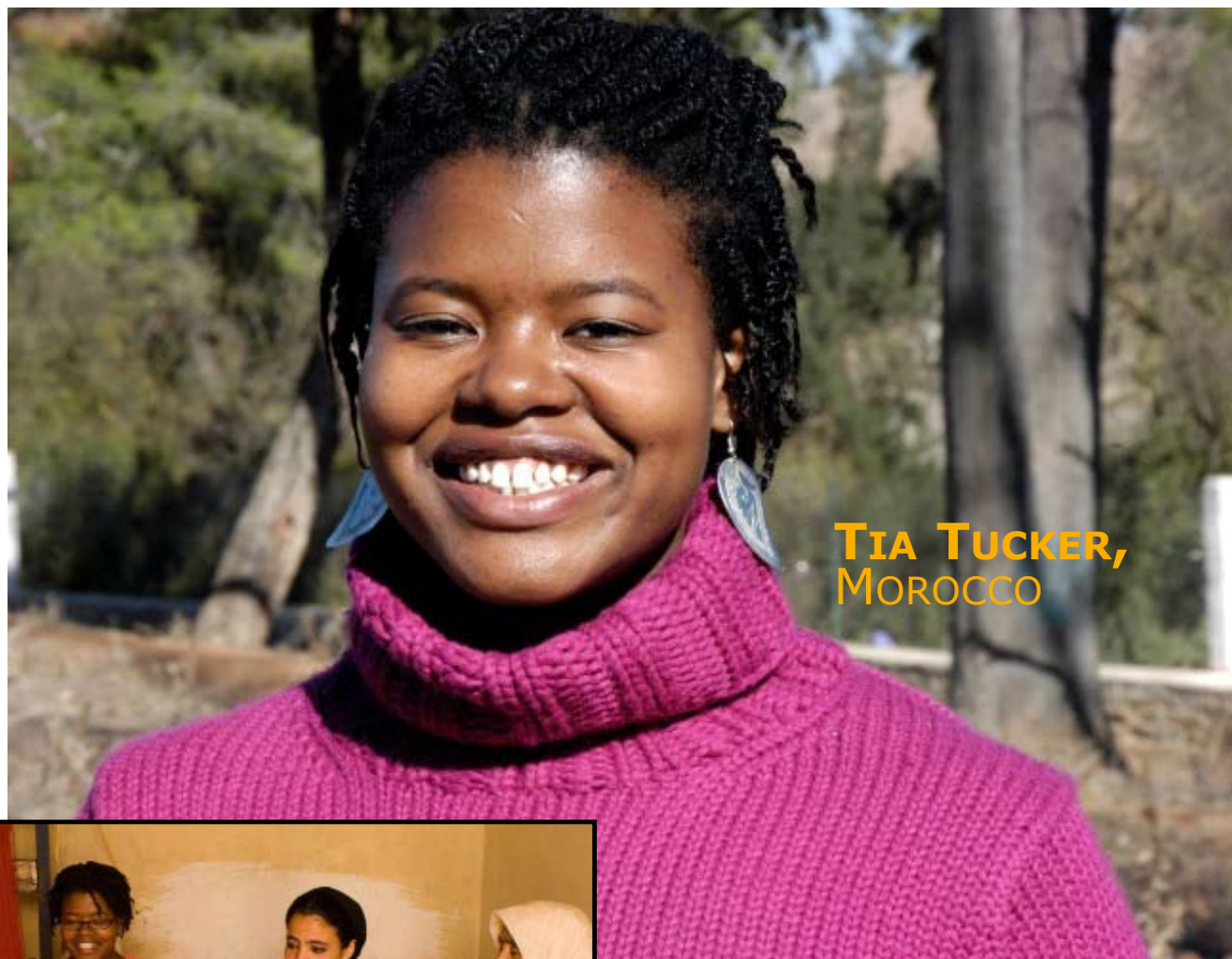


**PETER HENDRICKS AND
ALENE KENNEDY HENDRICKS,
GEORGIA**

A married couple taught teachers how to teach and joined them in song.



Peter Hendricks and Alene Kennedy Hendricks came as a married couple to Rustavi, a city in the Republic of Georgia. They not only taught English to young students, they also trained teachers. Lesson planning is not common for teachers in Georgia; Peter and Alene showed teachers how to put together lesson plans and learning objectives for each lesson. They also explored ways to make learning more fun, such as holding spelling bees and creative writing contests, singing songs and dancing.

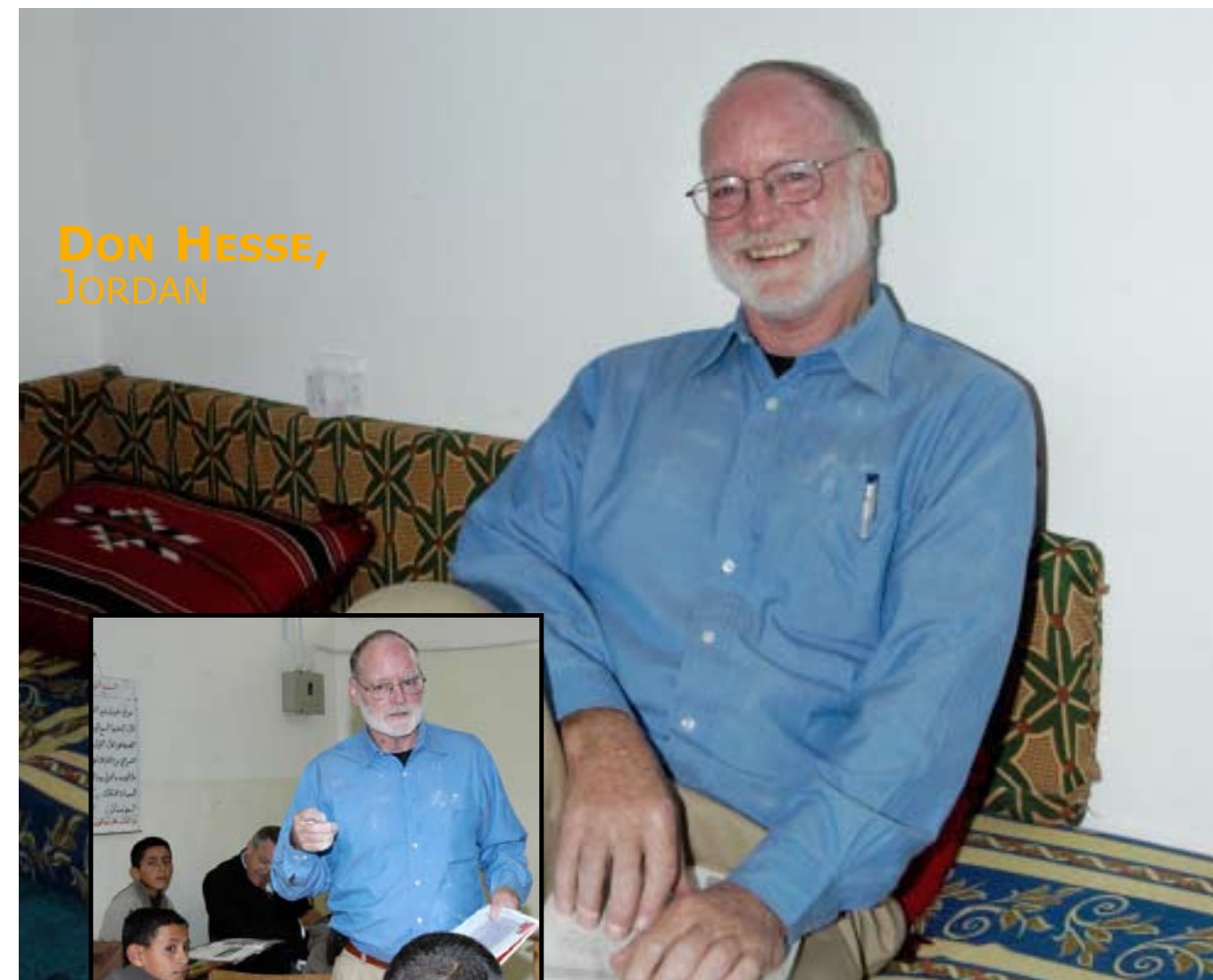


**TIA TUCKER,
MOROCCO**



She let people know
that they had a voice.

Besides teaching English in Tiflet, Morocco, Tia Tucker of Louisiana worked closely with women in the community. During her time in Morocco, Tucker worked with a women's sewing group and advised a women's weaving co-op. She taught the women about nutrition, exercise and disease prevention, but also helped them realize that women can have a voice — that they can impart useful knowledge. “They think, ‘I know something, and I can share it with somebody else. Just because I didn’t finish high school or just because I am a girl doesn’t mean I am not important,’” she said.



**DON HESSE,
JORDAN**

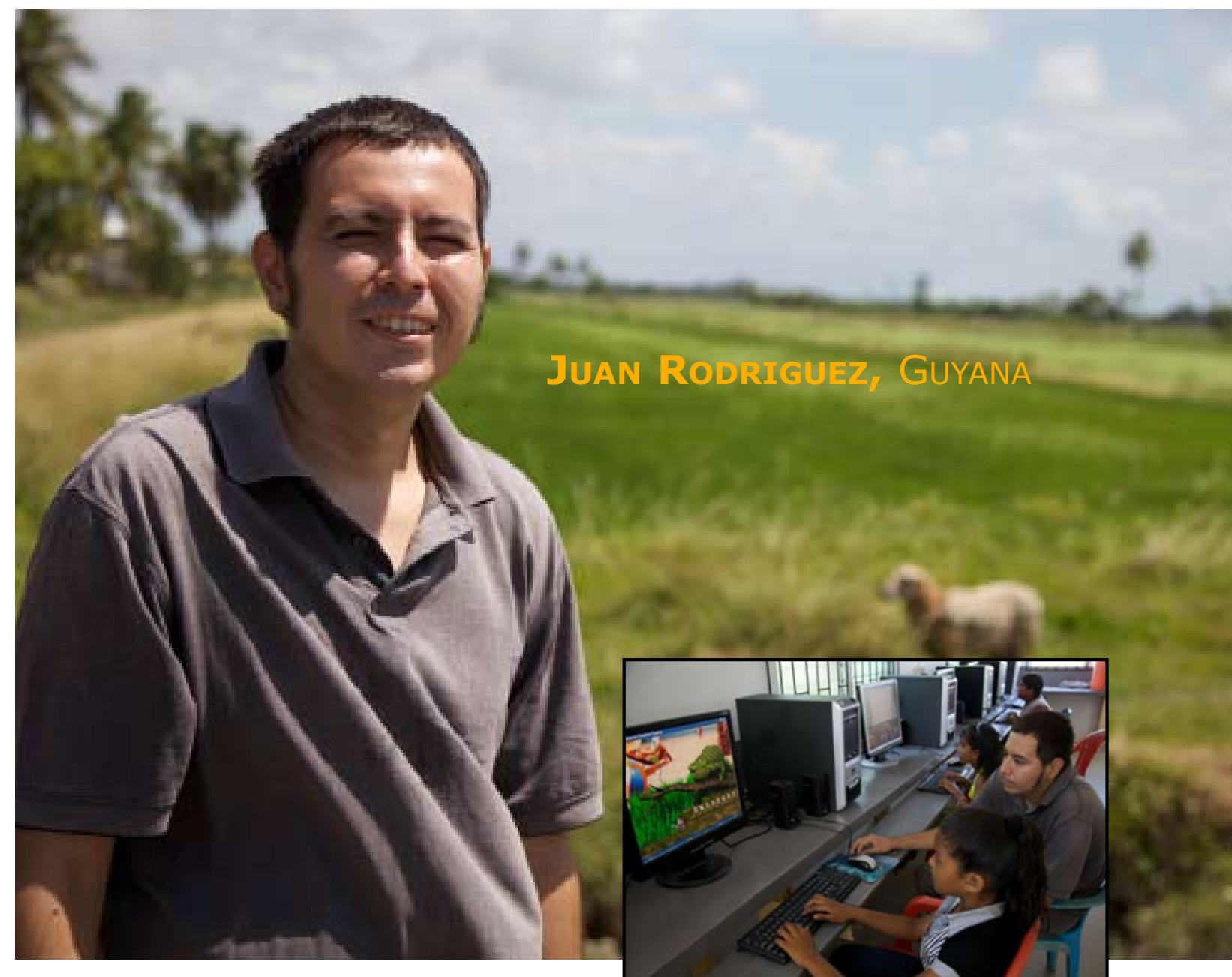
Nearly 40 years after his first stint with the Peace Corps, he took a second assignment as an English teacher.

Don Hesse enjoyed his Peace Corps service in Sierra Leone in 1968–1970 so much that nearly 40 years later he left San Francisco to serve two more years as a Peace Corps volunteer. This time he went to the town of Ayl in southern Jordan. Before he came, no one in Ayl could speak more than a handful of English words. Some teachers could read English science textbooks or Shakespeare plays, but no one knew how to carry on a conversation. At the boys’ school where he taught, his most enthusiastic students were the other teachers. “Not just the English teachers, but all of them, including the school custodian,” Hesse said. “They really want to learn how to speak English.”



An urban agriculturist grows food for the poor and sick, seizing new ways to provide therapy.

Californian Jared Tharp worked as an urban agriculturist in Dakar, Senegal. He and three local assistants worked in a garden at a hospital to provide free food to poor patients in the infectious disease ward. About two-thirds of those patients had HIV/AIDS and suffered from poor nutrition; most could not afford the regular hospital meals. At the same hospital, Tharp worked in another garden for the psychiatric ward. That garden not only produced food for patients, but also provided patients with therapeutic activity.



He taught computer skills and baseball.

When Juan Rodriguez of New Jersey came to English-speaking Guyana, he had to persuade the children he worked with that he was really an American, despite his Spanish name. The first graders through sixth graders came to understand more about the diversity of Americans as Juan helped them with their reading, typing and computer skills. He also showed them how to play America's national pastime, baseball. "That was a really fun thing because they came and they really enjoyed it, and every time they come up to me they wanted to learn more and play more baseball," Juan said.

Rachelle Olden,
Dominican Republic



Young people get a lesson in making healthy choices.

Some young women in Santiago, Dominican Republic, got a lengthy lesson about healthy living from Rachelle Olden of South Carolina. Olden taught them about avoiding HIV/AIDS, making healthy decisions and building self-esteem. The young women went back to their neighborhood schools, youth groups and community centers and shared what they had learned. At one of those community centers, Olden encouraged some boys and girls to paint a mural about this initiative. “This is a mural for *Escojo mi vida*, and *Escojo mi vida* means ‘I choose my life,’ which means I choose what decisions I make — I make my own healthy decisions and I protect myself from HIV and AIDS,” she said.

Scott Lea, Indonesia



Six days a week he teaches English, but every day he learns Indonesia’s language and culture.



Scott Lea of Colorado is the first and, so far, only Peace Corps volunteer on the Indonesian island of Madura. He is the first foreigner to have visited some communities, the people told him. Six days a week Lea teaches English to 210 11th graders. He also runs an English club one afternoon a week and holds a special class to prepare 12th graders for national exams. “Many days I feel like the best thing I do is walk around the community and greet people, chat,” he said. “It makes me feel like part of the community, and they appreciate the effort I, as a foreigner, put into learning their language and their culture.”



**KELLY PETROWSKI,
MALAWI**

A science teacher motivated her students by making class fun.

The only science teacher for more than 300 students at a secondary school in rural Malawi, Kelly Petrowski of Illinois taught biology and physical science. The school had no electricity or running water, but it did have science books, microscopes, glassware and chemicals. When she arrived, all that equipment was sitting in boxes without instructions. Sorting through the boxes to set up a lab was a challenge. Even more challenging was getting students to show up for class, but she won them over by doing some fun activities. “A big thing for me is that the students are becoming more motivated,” Petrowski said.



**ALBIN SIKORA,
BULGARIA**

An English class was one way of sharing, but he also had other ways.

Albin Sikora taught English in a Bulgarian village. His students loved the American street basketball they viewed online, so he started a basketball team. He loved the Bulgarian countryside but lamented the junk littering the streams, so he helped organize the first river clean-up in the village and invited students, their parents and their grandparents to participate. As he learned about the costumes and customs of this community, he shared with them small celebrations of American life: the villagers’ first Halloween costume party, complete with trick-or-treating, and their first American Thanksgiving dinner.



**PATTY AND HARVEY GAGNON,
KYRGYZ REPUBLIC**

**Teaching English through
American pop songs and
dance.**

Retired couple Patty and Harvey Gagnon from Michigan came to the Kyrgyz Republic to have an “adventure on the roof of the world.” She taught English to pupils from the first grade through the ninth. He worked as a business facilitator. “I try to help people either find grants, donors, loans, whatever it takes to get their project going,” he said. She baked cookies for the children — “I’ve never seen cookies go so fast,” she said. And with Harvey’s participation, Patty taught songs and dances. The children especially wanted to learn the lyrics of American pop songs.



LÖKI TOBIN, AZERBAIJAN

**A photography teacher encouraged her students to
express themselves and capture their community.**

Alaska native Löki Tobin wanted the young people of Zagatala, Azerbaijan, to express themselves artistically, so she asked the students in her photography class to take pictures of their community. “It provides youth with critical thinking skills, with self-expression, with stress management,” she said. She also took daily walks around the city to meet local people and tell them about America and Americans.

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ENGAGING THE WORLD



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